A SABBATH SCENE.

WHITTIER.

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Scarce had the solemn Sabbath-bell
  Ceased quivering in the steeple,
Scarce had the parson to his desk
  Walked stately through his people,

When down the summer shaded street
  A wasted female figure,
With dusky brow and naked feet,
  Came rushing wild and eager.



She saw the white spire through the trees,
  She heard the sweet hymn swelling;
O, pitying Christ! a refuge give
  That poor one in thy dwelling!

Like a scared fawn before the hounds,
  Right up the aisle she glided,
While close behind her, whip in hand,
  A lank-haired hunter strided.



She raised a keen and bitter cry,
To Heaven and Earth appealing:—
Were manhood's generous pulses dead?
Had woman's heart no feeling?

A score of stout hands rose between
The hunter and the flying;
Age clinched his staff, and maiden eyes
Flashed tearful, yet defying.



"Who dares profane this house and day?"
Cried out the angry pastor.
"Why, bless your soul, the wench 's a slave,
And I 'm her lord and master!

"I 've law and gospel on my side,
And who shall dare refuse me?"
Down came the parson, bowing low,
"My good sir, pray excuse me!



"Of course I know your right divine
To own and work and whip her;
Quick, deacon, throw that Polyglot
Before the wench, and trip her!"

Plump dropped the holy tome, and o'er
Its sacred pages stumbling,
Bound hand and foot, a slave once more,
The hapless wretch lay trembling.



I saw the parson tie the knots,
The while his flock addressing,
The Scriptural claims of slavery
With text on text impressing.

"Although," said he, "on Sabbath day,
All secular occupations
Are deadly sins, we must fulfil
Our moral obligations:



"And this commends itself as one
To every conscience tender;
As Paul sent back Onesimus,
My Christian friends, we send her!"

Shriek rose on shriek,—the Sabbath air
Her wild cries tore asunder;
I listened, with hushed breath, to hear
God answering with his thunder!



All still! — the very altar's cloth
Had smothered down her shrieking,
And, dumb, she turned from face to face,
For human pity seeking!

I saw her dragged along the aisle,
Her shackles harshly clanking;
I heard the parson, over all,
The Lord devoutly thanking!



My brain took fire: "Is this," I cried,
"The end of prayer and preaching?
Then down with pulpit, down with priest,
And give us Nature's teaching!

"Foul shame and scorn be on ye all
Who turn the good to evil,
And steal the Bible from the Lord,
To give it to the Devil!



"Than garbled text or parchment law
I own a statute higher;
And God is true, though every book
And every man 's a liar!"

Just then I felt the deacon's hand
In wrath my coat-tail seize on;
I heard the priest cry "Infidel!"
The lawyer mutter, "Treason!"



I started up, — where now were church,
Slave, master, priest, and people?
I only heard the supper-bell,
Instead of clanging steeple.

But, on the open window's sill,
O'er which the white blooms drifted,
The pages of a good old Book
The wind of summer lifted.



And flower and vine, like angel wings
  Around the Holy Mother,
Waved softly there, as if God's truth
  And Mercy kissed each other.

And freely from the cherry-bough
  Above the casement swinging,
With golden bosom to the sun,
  The oriole was singing.



As bird and flower made plain of old
The lesson of the Teacher,
So now I heard the written Word
Interpreted by Nature!

For to my ear methought the breeze
Bore Freedom's blessed word on;
THUS SAITH THE LORD: BREAK EVERY YOKE,
UNDO THE HEAVY BURDEN!